

CRITICAL NOTICE

Telling and Trusting: Reductionism and Anti-Reductionism in the Epistemology of Testimony

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Testimony: A Philosophical Study, by C.A.J. Coady. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992. Pp. 315. H/b £.40.00.

1. An uncharted landscape

Tony Coady's book *Testimony* is about how we gain knowledge from other people, through learning from their spoken and written reports and other tellings. Several major philosophers, including John Locke, David Hume, Thomas Reid, and Bertrand Russell, have written more briefly on "testimony" in this broad sense (Coady's historical chapters provide us with helpful critical accounts of their views), but this is the first book-length study devoted to the subject. The appearance of such a study is welcome, indeed long overdue: as Coady tells us, with much justice, "testimony is a prominent and underexplored epistemological landscape". The first forays into that terrain made in *Testimony* yield many important insights. Coady has been pondering the role of testimony in our lives for many years, and this study shows deep and considered thought. It is rich in detailed insights on many matters, and it flows from a firm and firmly held conception of the centrality of testimony, as a source within our structure of empirical knowledge, which has grown on Coady over the years.

Testimony is a book with a message, a cause to promote. Coady accuses post-Cartesian epistemology of neglecting testimony as a source of knowledge and concentrating myopically on perception. He diagnoses this approach as stemming from an *individualistic* conception of the human thinker's epistemic predicament, a conception which, he maintains, is not inevitable or compulsory a priori, but is historically and culturally contingent. (Coady sees it as allied to parallel individualistic

assumptions about the foundations of ethical and political motivation and obligation, which he regards as equally suspect.)

This individualistic conception, and its associated ideal of the “autonomous knower”, who is epistemically self-sufficient, free of unredeemed epistemic debts to any other person, is pithily expressed in Locke’s contention that “The floating of other men’s opinions in our brains makes us not one jot the more knowing, though they happen to be true” (Locke 1961, p. 58; Coady, p. 14). Coady sees this conception as the source of the view about the epistemology of testimony which is the main target of the book: the Reductive Position.

Reductionists about testimony hold that, if testimony is to be vindicated as a source not merely of belief, but of knowledge, our epistemic right to believe what others tell us must be exhibitable as grounded in other epistemic resources and principles—perception, memory and inference—which are regarded by them as both more fundamental, and less problematic. Within the reductionist camp we need to distinguish optimists and pessimists: common to them is the thesis, call it R-Nec, that such a reduction is needed in order to vindicate testimony. But optimists maintain, while pessimists deny, the thesis R-Poss, that such a reduction is possible. The optimistic combination is what Coady calls the “Reductive Position”. Pessimistic reductionists (Coady’s “Puritans”) conclude that testimony is not a source of justified belief, or knowledge, at all. In so doing they deny what we may call the *Commonsense Constraint* (CC): that testimony is, at least on occasion, a source of knowledge—CC, R-Nec and Not-(R-Poss) being an inconsistent triad.

The two-part overall aim of Coady’s book is first, to convince the reader of the untenability of the Reductive Position, by showing R-Poss to be false; and second, to defend a non-reductive conception of testimonial knowledge on which R-Nec is false. Thus its twin themes are to explore and reveal the testimony-soaked nature of all our knowledge, in virtue of which a reduction is not possible; and to persuade the reader (the arguments here are, perhaps necessarily, suasive rather than compelling) to come over to his non-individualistic epistemological perspective, from which reduction does not appear necessary, and so to vindicate our reliance on the word of others as a source not merely of belief, but of knowledge. From this alternative perspective, testimony is seen as a source of knowledge of broadly equal, primitive status along with its other main sources: perception, memory and inference.

The book is divided into five main parts. In Part I, after an opening chapter introducing some main themes, come two chapters in which Coady first describes the notion of testimony used in law (“formal testimony”), and then refines a variant one, applicable to everyday settings.

Part II consists of four historical chapters on Hume, Price, Russell and Reid on testimony. Of these, the one on Hume is by far the most important for Coady's central concern with the Reductive Position: his main arguments against R-Poss are here given their first airing. Parts IV and V ("The Puzzles" and "The Applications") constitute what one might think of as the second half of the book. Together they contain seven chapters discussing specific topics. Most of these follow Coady's favourite format, and approach an issue through exegesis and critical consideration of another author or authors' views. Thus Coady offers us critiques of Bradley on reports of events which contradict our own experience (Ch. 10); of Locke on the diminution of credibility of a report as it is relayed through an ever-longer "chain" of informants, and the consequently threatened "disappearance of history" (Ch. 11); of Collingwood on the role of testimony in historical research (Ch. 13); and of Bernard Williams' claim that mathematical knowledge cannot be gained through testimony (Ch. 14). Ch. 12 discusses a puzzle put forward by Dretske about the alleged non-communicability of knowledge in certain cases, while Ch. 15 discusses, in my view in an unfairly dismissive manner, empirical work on the reliability of testimony. Ch. 16 discusses the role of "expert" testimony in legal proceedings. These chapters contain many useful insights and observations. They will, as Coady intends, also be enjoyed by non-philosophers with an interest in the issues, most notably by historians inclined to reflect on the methods of their subject. They also do much to elaborate, and in important respects qualify, Coady's position on the central issues addressed in the first half of the book: the status of testimony, and the epistemic responsibilities of a would-be gainer of knowledge through testimony.

The core of that first half is the two chapters of Part III, "The Solution". These are billed as containing the heart of the book: Coady's arguments for his own, non-reductive position. But the reader finds as she progresses that the elaboration of the central components of Coady's position, and his arguments for it, are not confined to this Part. The style of the book (which I imagine reflects its genesis) is that of a series of essays around a common theme, and Coady's own views are not concentrated into a single statement, but appear as themes which are broached, elaborated and embroidered throughout the book. For instance, while the fullest exploration of the testimony-soaked nature of all our knowledge is made in Ch. 9, important material on this theme is found also in Ch. 1, in the chapter on Hume, and in Ch. 13. Equally, on the central question of what sort of scrutiny of her informant is required of the gainer of knowledge through testimony, Coady's position receives essential clarification, indeed qualification, in Ch. 2 and in the later "applications" chapters. The impatient reader who

hopes to find out the guts of what Coady thinks about testimony by reading two central chapters is out of luck. His views are not so much stated, as emergent from the whole.

As this brief survey shows, *Testimony* is a rich book, containing a wealth of ideas on many topics within the broad area of our reliance on the word of others. In this review I can cover only part of its scope. I shall first say something about the definition of testimony, and then concentrate on the central questions about the status of testimony, and the epistemic duties of a rational hearer. I shall review the main arguments given by Coady for his two central claims, the denials of R-Poss, and of R-Nec, and examine his own position. But something must first be said about exactly what “reduction” is. The options are more differentiated than Coady envisages: weaker and stronger reductionist theses can be distinguished. As we shall see, Coady’s arguments, and his own position, look somewhat different in the light of these distinctions. It must be observed that my task involves some textual archaeology and reconstruction. My account of Coady’s views is constructed from evidence spread through some 300 pages. I hope that it is fair to them.

II. Defining testimony

The section on formal testimony investigates the notion employed in legal contexts and formulates a set of conditions which describes it. The method and object of the discussion of “natural testimony” is less clear. What seems to emerge is that Coady believes there is a concept we laypersons standardly operate with which is, roughly, that of a-report-made-by-someone-in-a-position-to-know-about-the-matter-in-question. He takes this to be an appropriate epistemic kind about which to theorise and attaches the label “testimony” to it. Tendentially, he builds into his definition of the phenomenon that testimony that *P* is evidence that *P*. This is surely so, at least on occasions, but arguably it would be better to define the central concept in an epistemologically neutral way, and then argue for this as a consequence. It is disappointing that the product of this extended discussion is not used more in the central chapters. The central epistemological question about testimony is whether there is a presumptive epistemic right to believe what one is told just as such, without further evidence of the reliability of one’s informant. How plausible it is that there is such a right depends on how wide the notion of “testimony” is taken to be—reports by reliable eye-witnesses or others “in a position to know” only, or the much broader category of tellings in general (i.e. with no restrictions either on subject matter, or on the speaker’s epistemic rela-

tion to it). But Coady does not squarely make up his mind about, and then keep his eye on, a precise conception of the domain he is theorising about. My own view, contrary to Coady's inclinations, is that the broader category of tellings generally is the relevant kind, at least if we are considering the epistemic norms to which a rational hearer should conform. A hearer generally knows that she has been told that *P* just in virtue of observing an appropriate such performance. But as for whether her interlocutor is authoritative about what he asserts, it is problematic whether she can ever tell this just through observation of his current performance, and clear that she sometimes cannot; and often she will not know (as opposed to presuming) this. If the authority of the testifier were built into the definition of testimony, it might seem plausible that there is a general epistemic right to believe what is "testified" to one; but this would simply pass the epistemic buck, from the hearer's point of view, to the question: is what I have just received a piece of "testimony" or not? So the epistemological issues are obscured by such a definitional stop. Moreover Coady fudges, in this chapter and elsewhere, over the key question whether the *fact* of the speaker's authoritativeness is enough, for any belief formed by the hearer in what is asserted to be knowledge, or if this fact must be known by the hearer.

III. What reduction is

What, more exactly, would it be to "reduce" testimony as a source of knowledge to other sources? So far as I can see, and Coady seems to agree, the issue arises only within a *justificationist* account of knowledge as belief for which the believer knows, at least potentially, some set of premisses which justify her belief. (There are a number of ways in which the threat of regress here may be avoided.) What does the issue about testimony amount to, on such a conception of knowledge?

We normal adult humans share a commonsense conception of the world we live in, and of our own nature and place in it. This shared body of knowledge includes a folk physics, a folk psychology, and an elementary folk linguistics: a conception of language both as representational system and as social institution, including the characteristic roles of speaker and hearer. According to this commonsense world-picture, testimony is one of a number of causal-cum-informational processes through which we receive or retain information about the empirical world, the others being sight and our other modes of perceptual awareness, and memory. Each of these *epistemic links*, as we may call them (assuming them indeed to yield knowledge at least some of the time) is a rich source of beliefs: in what

we see or seem to see, in what we remember or seem to remember, and in what we are told. In each case these beliefs may be defeated by contrary evidence. What is contrary evidence? Our common world-theory not only upholds the existence of these epistemic links, but includes a conception of their conditions of successful operation. We know that each of the links is intrinsically fallible, yielding true beliefs only when it is working properly. In the case of both sight and testimony we know of specific *validity (V-) conditions* for the link's operation such that its deliverances are true to how things really are only when these V-conditions obtain. For sight the V-conditions are that the circumstances of viewing, and state of the viewer, are normal in various relevant respects which can be spelled out. For testimony, they are that the speaker is sincere in her utterance, i.e. she believes what she asserts, and that her own asserted belief is true. Let us call this last condition a speaker's *competence* with respect to the subject matter of her assertion, and the whole two-part condition her *trustworthiness* with respect to it. (The fluke case where a lie is offset by the falsity of the would-be deceiver's belief is not an instance of proper working of the link. Nor are any of the myriad other acquirings of true beliefs by the hearer which result from her observation of the speaker's utterance, but which are not gained through the distinctive mechanism of accepting as true what he says.) The beliefs produced by an operation of a link are, rightly, defeated if the subject comes to have evidence that its V-conditions were not fulfilled: in the case of sight, that the lighting was non-standard, or that there was a trick mirror, etc.; in the case of testimony, that the speaker was lying, or was incompetent.

What of the case when the V-conditions are fulfilled, and the link is working properly? There are two broad options for epistemology here. It may be held that acceptance of the deliverances of the link—belief that what one seems to see is so, or that what one is told is so—is only ever *knowledge* if it is supported by independent knowledge, in turn empirically based, that the V-conditions of the link are fulfilled on that occasion; and that a rational individual will not believe what she seems to see, or what she is told, unless she has evidence that they are fulfilled. Or it may be held that a subject of the link has a presumptive right to believe its deliverances as such, in effect assuming that its V-conditions are fulfilled, but without any need to think about whether they are so, nor to possess evidence that they are. (The right is only presumptive since evidence, in a given instance, that the V-conditions are not fulfilled must defeat it.) We may say that knowledge gained through a link is *inferential* (since it must be backed by a substantial justification) in the first case, and *direct* (since no non-trivial justification for it is needed) in the second. (This terminol-

ogy follows what seems to be Coady's usage in Ch. 8, where he compares perception and testimony in this respect.)

Our commonsense world-theory, conjoined only with our *general* canons of correct inference and rational belief-formation, implies that knowledge may be gained through the link of testimony only inferentially, via knowledge of the speaker's trustworthiness, since, as our commonsense linguistics shows, her assertion, flukes apart, will be true only if she is trustworthy, and, as our folk psychology shows, she may well not be (it is no more than common sense that there is plenty of lying and honest error in the world). Thus testimonial knowledge can be treated as direct knowledge only if an original epistemic principle proper to testimony, a *presumptive right (PR) principle* for that link, is postulated. Let us call the claim that there is such a presumptive right to believe in what one is told just as such (but defeated by evidence of the speaker's insincerity or error) the *PR thesis*.

In the light of our commonsense conception of the link of testimony as just explained, we can now say this: testimony as a source of knowledge reduces to other sources just if the status as knowledge of beliefs gained through testimony can be explained (as an instance of perception plus our normal forms of inductive and deductive inference) without postulating such an original PR principle. A hearer's knowledge of what speech act her informant has made is perceptual knowledge. This reductive thesis will hold of beliefs acquired through testimony of some individual *M* if, for each of those beliefs, *M* had on the occasion of its acquisition adequate grounds to know that her informant was trustworthy, and *M*'s belief in what she was told was inferentially based, mediated by that knowledge of trustworthiness. Note that the perspective that I have taken up on this issue is emphatically not a foundationalist one, since it appeals to our commonsense conception of the link: it is part of a coherentist process of internal criticism and (in favourable cases) vindication of our usual methods of acquiring beliefs, which starts unashamedly from where we start from—our commonsense view of the world and our place in it.

The menu in epistemologies of testimony seems, then, confined to this exhaustive dichotomy: accept or reject the PR thesis. This seems to be how Coady views the position. As we shall see shortly, Coady argues in the light of the *Commonsense Constraint*, which he accepts, that the reductive option of rejecting it is ruled out, since each of us continually relies on the testimony of others, and the belief system of each of us is generally contaminated from past reliance on uncritically accepted testimony. For Coady, therefore, despite, as he tells us, a temperamental inclination to skepticism about what others tell him, it came to seem that "our trust in the word of others is fundamental to the very idea of serious cog-

nitive activity”, that “however uncongenial, this outlook [was] the only honest one to adopt” (Coady, Preface, p. vii).

How can this be right? It is familiar that it is hopeless to attempt to treat knowledge through either memory or perception as inferential rather than direct (I cannot rehearse the arguments here). But the case of testimony seems very different. In Ch. 8 Coady compares the link of testimony with that of perception, looking for parallels. He takes it that perceptual knowledge is direct, and tries to make it look plausible that testimonial knowledge is also. His main argument is that a source of knowledge need not be infallible to be portrayed as yielding direct knowledge: a fallible but reliable belief-inducing link can do so. (Specifically, Coady suggests, once one acknowledges that knowledge may not be deductively closed, the way is opened to holding that perceptual knowledge is direct, although the perceiver usually does not know the V-conditions of the perceptual link to be satisfied; and similarly for testimony.) Though this claim is correct, it affords only a permissive argument for seeing testimonial knowledge as direct, not a compelling one. And the chapter discovers significant disanalogies between the two links, most importantly with respect to the kind of “informational states” they characteristically produce in their subject. (Understanding an assertoric utterance with truth condition *P* involves entertaining the thought of *P*; but this manner of representing *P* is not at all like an experience as of *P*.) In my own view, these disanalogies are epistemologically crucial: there are compelling reasons to treat perceptual knowledge as direct, none of which apply to testimony, and good reasons not to treat testimony as direct.¹

Coady maintains that the felt need not to take others’ trustworthiness on trust is a merely cultural phenomenon from which we can be weaned. But—as above—does not mere logic, plus our commonsense knowledge of what kind of act an assertion is, and what other people are like, entail that we should not just believe whatever we are told, without critically assessing the speaker for trustworthiness? We know too much about human nature to want to trust anyone, let alone everyone, uncritically. As Hume emphasises in his celebrated discussion of miracles, and even Thomas Reid acknowledges, we know too well how, and how easily, what we are told may fail to be true. How can the PR principle be an acceptable norm to guide us in our doxastic response to what others tell us? How can we embrace the non-reductive position? If there are no further options, we may feel uncomfortable indeed.

¹ See Fricker 1986, Ch. 6, and Fricker 1987.

IV. Differentiating the options; the impossibility of “global” reduction

Fortunately the position is not, after all, so stark. We begin to see that there is a range of positions possible, not just one or the other extreme, when we differentiate between PR theses according to (i) the strength of the PR principle, and (ii) the domain over which it applies. I shall return to (i) when I consider what precisely Coady’s own position regarding the duties of a rational hearer amounts to. It is much less radical than his rhetoric suggests. Regarding (ii), we need to make two distinctions which cut across each other. The first is between different kinds of tellings. I shall suggest below that our attitude to others’ testimony should depend on its subject matter. The second is between different phases in the career of a recipient of testimony: the developmental and the mature phases.

There are two different questions about the epistemic status of testimony. What place does it have in supporting a mature individual’s existing web of knowledge, her world-theory? And what should her attitude be to new instances of it: uncritical trust, or critical scrutiny of informants? I shall suggest that, while trusted past testimony has an ineliminable place in supporting a mature individual’s belief system, this does not imply that uncritical trust is the attitude she must or should take to new informants.

Each one of us, in becoming an adult master of our commonsense scheme of things, has been through a historical process of development during which her attitude towards her teachers and other informants was one of simple trust. No one of us satisfies the condition satisfied by the individual *M* described above whose testimonial knowledge reduces to perception and inference. Instead, each of us has, mixed up in her total web of belief, many beliefs acquired through testimony which at the time of acquisition were accepted uncritically. Bearing in mind the role of teaching by others whom we trust unquestioningly in our learning of language (which is not separate from our learning about the world), this seems inevitable (though there is a deep issue here about the possibility of an isolated thinker and speaker of a self-invented language). At any rate, this phase of simple trust in others, and its input into our resulting world-conception, characterises all of *us*.

This fact about our historical development does not in itself show that our testimonial knowledge does not reduce in the sense explained above. Because it does not preclude the Cartesian reconstructive option: identify and then suspend belief in all my simply-trusted testimonial beliefs and others based on them, and accept them again only after the trustworthiness of their source is established from the belief-base that is left. If a person

could do that and did it, or if she were like *M*, then her entire corpus of testimonial beliefs would simultaneously be justified, and count as knowledge, without appeal to a PR principle at any point. Let us call this a Global Reduction of testimonial knowledge to other sources. If we cannot do that, nor are we like *M*, then our beliefs acquired through testimony or whose support depends in part on testimony (which, as we shall see below, is nearly all of them) qualify as knowledge only if we do not insist on the reductionist requirement thus globally understood, $R-Nec_{global}$, but instead accept the PR thesis at least with respect to an individual's developmental phase. This is the phase during which "light dawns gradually over the whole" (Wittgenstein 1977, §141), and a person comes to know the world-picture of common sense, including the commonsense conception of the link of testimony itself. Thus it brings awareness of the role of the speaker, and of the possibility of her lack of sincerity or competence.

The greatest strength of *Testimony* is Coady's entrenched awareness of the impossibility of global reduction. He shows convincingly, through examples elaborated in many places, the diffused general dependence on past testimony in the belief-system of each of us. Coady opens his case in Ch. 4 in his critique of the arch-reductionist, Hume. There he argues convincingly, against Hume, that there is no chance of my getting *independent* empirical confirmation of the proposition that "testimony is generally reliable", because my personal observation-base is far too small. He notes how natural it is—but, for Hume's project, fatal—to take "observations" to be the social pool of these, rather than my personal ones, and that Hume slides unthinkingly into this trap. But the strongest arguments come in Ch. 9, where Coady points out that the theory-dependence of perception extends to a frequent reliance on background theory acquired through testimony. Often what is casually classified as perceptual knowledge is available through perception only given such a background of theory acquired in part from testimony. For example in my "observation" that Russian soldiers are marching in a parade, my knowing them to be Russian may depend on inference from my earlier reading of a newspaper report. (Often, though not in this example, the background theory will have been acquired during the early period of simple trust.) Equally, I can know them to be soldiers only if I possess that complex institutional concept. If, moreover, our conceptualising framework is itself socially determined, during our acquisition of our language, then *all* perception is essentially dependent on past testimony. The issue is deep and difficult, but it is certainly not safe to claim, without further investigation, that we have any beliefs at all which are not in some way contaminated by dependence on past simply-trusted testimony. But if there is no testimony-free belief-

base to isolate, then the project of justifying our acceptance of the testimony-infected remainder by building up from it cannot get started.

V. “Local” reduction is possible; Coady on the rational hearer

Coady takes the epistemological options for testimony to be confined to: PR or no PR. Thus in elaborating his examples he does not particularly attend to whether they show a mature person’s current dependence on testimonial knowledge acquired uncritically in the developmental phase, or are cases of *current* uncritical trust. But noticing that global reduction is unattainable is the first step, and not the last, in developing a positive epistemology of testimony: the options can be refined, and when they are this distinction becomes crucial.

The position for which I would argue—although here I can do no more than gesture towards the case I would make—is that we must accept a PR with respect to the developmental phase, but that we need and should not do so with respect to the mature phase. Simply-trusted testimony plays an inevitable role in the causal process by which we become masters of our commonsense scheme of things; but once we are so, the nature of testimony, as a link which it reveals, entails that our belief in what others tell us should always be governed by our monitoring of them for trustworthiness.

Can we do this? I shall look at Coady’s arguments against R-Nec below, but one of them I must mention now. There is in *Testimony* an implicit transcendental argument: we have knowledge through testimony; reduction of testimonial knowledge is impossible; therefore testimonial knowledge cannot require reduction. (CC, not-R-Poss, therefore not-R-Nec.) When “reduction” here is understood as global reduction I think this argument is sound, and thus I agree with Coady that we must, perforce, accept the PR thesis with respect to the developmental phase.

We have agreed with Coady that it is impossible for any one of us to provide an independent proof of the trustworthiness of her past informants generally—independent in the sense that that proof does not itself rely on information directly or indirectly due to any of them. Now on this matter of empirical confirmation of trustworthiness Coady assumes, both in his discussion of Hume and elsewhere, that it must be achieved through establishing a generalisation governing *all* instances of testimony: that it is generally reliable. But while this would be the quickest way to certify one’s past reliance, it is not in principle the only way. I might, after abro-

gating all dependence, then seek to establish the trustworthiness of my past informants one by one. Since, as we have seen, the global reductive project anyway cannot get started, this point is academic. But the matter becomes crucial when we turn to the question of *local reduction*, as I shall call it. Acknowledging my general and irredeemable debt to past testimony, I may nonetheless want to trust no new informants unless I have grounds to believe them trustworthy. But to achieve this in any one case I need not establish any *generalities* about testimony at all. Confronted with a particular person telling me a particular thing, I need only to establish, without assuming that very thing, that she is on this occasion sincere, and is competent about the subject matter of her assertion, in order rightly to believe without recourse to a PR principle for this occasion. This is a far less daunting prospect than that which Coady holds out as required: establishing the general reliability of testimony as a category. My reliance on a particular piece of testimony *reduces locally* just if I have adequate grounds to take my informant to be trustworthy on this occasion independently of accepting as true her very utterance. (Of course the simply-trusted testimony of others will feature in the background of knowledge I bring to the occasion. The point of the local/global distinction is to separate out these factors in my epistemic situation.)

Such grounds are often, though not always or trivially, available to a hearer.² So R-Poss_{local} holds, and there is no transcendental argument against R-Nec_{local} and for a PR with respect to the mature, as distinct from the developmental, phase. Are there other arguments for one? The question is that of whether we should treat testimonial knowledge as direct, on a par with perceptual knowledge. We saw earlier that Coady's arguments in Ch. 8 are inconclusive, and I think there is a strong case against.

Whether and how often one allows that there are empirical grounds for taking a speaker to be trustworthy depends on what one takes as constituting that. There is room for thinner and thicker requirements. Equally, what dispensation from scrutiny of her informant a PR principle allows a hearer admits of degree. Thus again there is not a black and white contrast between two options, but instead a spectrum of positions. In my view, a PR principle worthy of the name must dispense a hearer from the requirement to monitor and assess a speaker for trustworthiness. The contrasted position I have suggested (see Fricker 1994) is that a hearer is always required thus to monitor and assess a speaker, though this may be automatic and unconscious. She must engage in a piece of psychological interpretation of her informant, constructing an explanation of her utterance as an intentional speech act. Estimates of her sincerity and her competence,

² I argue for this in Fricker 1994. The view of testimony briefly sketched here is more fully developed there.

or their lack, will be part of this explanatory mini-theory. Within the interpretative exercise sincerity is the default setting: it can be assumed unless there are signs of its lack. But—and this is why the account is not a PR theory—the hearer must always be scrutinising the speaker for telltale signs of its absence, and she must be alert to the presence of such signs. Similarly, competence may be assumed as default setting, but in this case with respect to a subclass of tellings only, viz. those with subject matters for which commonsense psychological knowledge licenses one to expect the speaker to be competent about them: such as her name, where she lives, what she had for breakfast, what is in clear view in front of her, and so forth. Again, the speaker must be sensitive to indicators of its lack. The interpretative task described can be, and typically is, done by a hearer, often automatically and without conscious attention. A hearer who engages in it does not believe what she is told uncritically, and she has empirical grounds for her trust in her informant.

Coady takes himself to be advocating the PR thesis across the board: trust in the word of others unsupported by any empirical ground for it is, he says, an inevitable foundation of our empirical knowledge. But when one examines closely a number of passages where he describes what he regards as paradigmatic episodes of testimony, the position implicit in them seems to amount to the one sketched above. In particular, Coady seems to envisage alertness to signs of lack of sincerity or competence, which I have picked on as a key feature dividing PR from no-PR accounts, as being required. In Ch. 8 Coady describes an episode in which he rings up to find out what is the amount of his outstanding telephone bill: “I ring up the telephone company ... and am told by an anonymous voice that [my bill is] \$165. ... No thought of determining the veracity and reliability of the witness occurs to me nor, *given that the total is within tolerable limits*, does the balancing of probabilities figure in my acceptance.” He adds: “... *There is nothing hesitant or suspicious about the unknown communicant’s responses* ...” (Coady p. 143, my italics). We can easily accept that the listener here does not consciously consider the question of the trustworthiness of his informant. It is quite inessential that assessment be conscious; it may occur automatically, without the subject’s attention being directed to it. The significant phrases in this passage are those italicised. What they suggest is precisely the active sub-personal monitoring of the speaker by the hearer for signs of lack of sincerity or competence described above. Coady’s remarks in Ch. 2, in a discussion of the role of the recipient of testimony, are even more explicit: “What happens characteristically in the reception of testimony is that the audience operates a sort of learning mechanism which has certain critical capacities built into it [Thus] we may have ‘no reason to doubt’ another’s communication

even where there is no question of our being gullible; we may simply recognise that the standard warning signs of deceit, confusion, or mistake are not present ...” (Coady, p. 47). And at the end of Ch. 12, Coady writes:

It is of the essence of hearing a witness and passing on what he has to say that you treat his communication as a worthwhile contribution to settling some issue. If you pass the message on as a piece of testimony you have already judged it in a certain way, bringing powers of assessment and discrimination to bear upon it. You have, at a minimum ... [made] an assessment of the competence of the speaker. More substantially, you will judge how reliable the communication is and endorse it appropriately... . No great degree of conscious deliberation need be involved in these processes and, characteristically, it is not. (Coady, p. 220)

These passages seem to me exactly right. The position Coady is committed to in them, concerning what is required of a mature hearer, is the one sketched above, and not a more radical PR thesis. They do not, however, fit very well with the claim of Ch. 8 that testimonial knowledge is direct. And they clearly commit Coady to holding that “the rational person does not believe just any and every thing he is told”, although this is a phrase he puts into the mouth of what he sees as the opposition (Coady, p. 143). The position sketched above also makes the best sense available of Coady’s puzzling insistence that “the attitudes of critical appraisal and of trust are not diametrically opposed ...” (Coady, p. 47). They certainly seem to be (unless Coady merely means that we trust someone after appraising them and finding them trustworthy!), since “appraise” and “do not appraise” are contraries, and Coady really owes it to us to explain—as he does not—precisely how they can fit together. Interpreting “trust” in terms of the default setting in favour of sincerity and competence is the nearest I can come to making them do so. Alternatively, at the back of Coady’s mind may be an unformulated thought of simple trust in the developmental phase leading to a mature phase characterised by appraisal. I think the tensions between what Coady says in different places arise because he does not make the distinction I have suggested between global and local reduction; this is what he needs in order to reconcile his appreciation of the impossibility of global reduction with the intuitions expressed in the quoted passages about how a mature hearer assesses a speaker.

VI. The need to disaggregate

I find my own intuitions about testimony wildly volatile: consider some cases, and it seems obvious that we *must* have a default position of trust

in what others tell us—that human personal relations would be unimaginable without this; but consider others, and it seems equally obvious that our attitude to others must be critical and skeptical, that we must and do weigh the balance of probabilities against what they say being true, on the one hand, and against their being mistaken or insincere on the other. The moral is obvious, once glimpsed: why assume that testimony, defined as tellings generally, must be treated as a unitary category, when we come to the question what our correct epistemic response to it is? The broad category of tellings-in-general (i.e. with no restriction on subject matter, nor on the speaker's relation to it) is the right domain to take as our topic for theory, when we consider the epistemic predicament a hearer confronts, since we would like a theory which covers tellings of all kinds, and because being a telling-that-*P* is a property of an utterance which is *transparent* to the hearer: she can tell that she has observed one, just through doing so. But as regards the likelihood of their being true, tellings-in-general are a rag-bag category. Intuitively, some people or types of people on some topics are reliable, others on others aren't. Thus the key to the epistemology of testimony is: disaggregate. Disaggregate both regarding the question of whether and when we may rightly trust without evidence, and regarding the empirical confirmation of speakers' trustworthiness. I have suggested that there is a default presumption in favour of competence, but only with respect to a restricted range of subject matters: those where what we all know about people and their normal capabilities shows that competence may indeed be presumed. As regards confirmation, the main strategic mistake in Coady's approach is that he assumes, in the theoretical case he builds, that testimony must be empirically confirmed as reliable *en bloc*, as a single category. We have seen that even in a Cartesian reconstructive project this would not be essential. (In this unattainable project one abrogates dependence on all past instances simultaneously; but this does not entail that their rehabilitation must also be simultaneous and general.) The only project in which it would be essential to vindicate the evidence of testimony in general, rather than that of specific testifiers or types of testifier, would be a retrospective "internal" vindication of one's past reliance on many now-irrecoverable instances of testimony (see below). But trying to make an indiscriminating generalisation about the reliability or otherwise of tellings-in-general is no less of a mistake than trying, say, to formulate a single general statement about how dark people's hair is, or how many children they have. (One can give an average, but that is quite another thing.) It is true that Coady's more restricted definition of testimony mitigates these charges, since the authoritative-ness of the speaker is built into it. But this restriction of the domain seems to have been forgotten in, for example, the chapter on Hume, which deals

with tellings generally. And, as suggested earlier, the trouble with Coady's proposed definition is that it obscures the epistemology because it defines a type which is not transparent to the hearer. (My proposed restriction by type of subject matter does, in contrast, give a sub-class of tellings which is transparent. It will cut across Coady's restriction.)

This is why Coady's somewhat jeering dismissal in Ch. 15 of empirical work on the reliability of testimony is wrong. (It is also ill-mannered. This chapter, uniquely, made me quite cross.) He may well be right that there are flaws in the existing experimental work; but a philosopher should be able to see beyond this. And while such work, conceived as an independent investigation into the reliability of all testimony as a single category, would be, as Coady rightly points out, incoherent (since the investigation itself must depend on testimony), there are clearly other ways of conceiving it: as testing, non-circularly, the reliability of specific kinds of testimony, in specific circumstances; or as seeking an internal, rather than a foundational, vindication of reliance on testimony. Certainly, as Coady shows, there are acute methodological difficulties in such studies. But that is so in social psychology generally, and makes it a difficult subject, not an unimportant one. Of course, there is the other possibility—fascinating and alarming—that empirical work itself relying on some testimony might conclude that testimony is generally unreliable. Coady does not probe this issue. Instead he assures us that “testimony cannot be unreliable if its reliability is required to prove that it is unreliable” (Coady, p. 265). Unfortunately this is not true. It is true that a proof of the unreliability of all testimony which itself relied on testimony would be self-undermining. But testimony might be unreliable, all the same.

VII. The arguments for the non-reductive position: internal vindication

This brings me to the last matter I want to discuss: Coady's positive arguments against R-Nec. We have seen how the options for accounts of testimony diversify when we distinguish between PR principles according to their strength and their domain of application. Accounts which maintain a PR thesis also differ according to how much meta-level defence of its existence they think is needed, and how much they offer. At one extreme is the “Fundamentalist” who takes our (alleged) right to uncritical trust in testimony as an epistemological primitive, not in need of meta-level justification of any kind. Thomas Reid comes near to this extreme although, as Coady notes, even he defends our right to trust by appeal to its natural-

ness for us social creatures; this claim having a place, in his philosophy, within a broader naturalistically-minded assertion of the rightfulness as such of our proper cognitive capacities and tendencies. The other extreme would be a meta-level reductive defence: the ordinary person's right to trust defended by the philosopher who provides a non-circular proof of the general reliability of testimony. This, we have seen, is not on. But between the two extremes there is a mid-way position, which we may call that of Internal Vindication. It is not guaranteed that the world-picture which we attain through reliance on, *inter alia*, simply-trusted testimony, will itself endorse testimony as reliable. The situation could instead be the alarming self-undermining one noted above. By the same token, *internal* vindications of the reliability of testimony—ones which unashamedly use the world-theory arrived at via testimony to demonstrate its reliability—if such are available, have some force in vindicating our reliance on it.

Coady's overall position is one of Internal Vindicationism. We have seen earlier that he implicitly maintains a transcendental argument for the PR thesis: it must hold, since otherwise testimonial beliefs would not be knowledge, and we know they are. But while this argument is sound, so long as the Commonsense Constraint is taken as binding (as I and Coady both think it is), the non-reductionist position is certainly rendered more comfortable if some more positive arguments in support of the PR thesis can be given. In addition to suasive remarks about the non-compulsory character of the individualistic stance in epistemology, Coady offers two such arguments, both in Ch. 9. (Both are of a sort acceptable to an individualist.) The first argument deploys Davidsonian considerations about the nature of belief, and of language, to argue that it is an *a priori* truth that testimony is generally reliable. This argument I find unconvincing. I agree with Coady that it is an *a priori* truth that if some community of creatures speaks a language, then not all the assertions they make in their language (over some reasonably lengthy period of time) are false. Considerations about how causal links between thinker and world are involved in fixing reference, and about how linguistic meaning is fixed by hearers' and speakers' reactive dispositions, entail this. (Coady prefers to cast the argument in interpretationist mode, but that is inessential.) But this is a fairly weak conclusion. It is not strong enough to show that testimony is generally reliable, nor to support the PR thesis. Coady seeks to strengthen the conclusion by appeal to Davidson's argument, itself based upon considerations about interpretation, that belief is by its nature mainly veridical. But, whatever one thinks of Davidson's own argument, it will not serve the purpose. This is shown by the passage from Davidson which Coady cites: "...What is shared [and hence, it is argued, true] does not in general call for com-

ment: it is too dull, trite, or familiar to stand notice” (Davidson 1984, p. 199; Coady, p. 156). Precisely. The great mass of a person’s beliefs which must mainly be true (salva the hypothesis that we have here a believer at all) concern what is too boringly obvious and familiar to be worth asserting. We only bother to say what is—relatively—surprising and controversial. Thus there is no implication from the truth-in-the-main of beliefs to the truth-in-the-main of assertions.

Coady’s second line is the argument from “coherence and cohesion”. This is an argument from the internal coherence of our world-theory, and the cohesion shown between the deliverances of our different epistemic links (perception, memory and testimony), to the truth (at least at the empirical level, if not the transcendental) of that world-theory, and so too the general veracity of those links, as the best explanation of this. This seems to me a powerful line of argument which, where its premiss holds, can do much to reassure someone that her early period of simple trust was one in which she learned how the world is, and not a string of deceptions or false society-wide myths. Another way of putting the point is as the observation that a belief first acquired through testimony very often gains support later on both through corroboration by other testimony, and through its coherence with what we learn from perception, and the empirical theory we base on this. Equally, such a belief may be later discredited. The argument from coherence is shown to be powerful from the fact that it is by no means guaranteed that a person’s world-theory will exhibit a high degree of coherence. It is not a mere logical possibility, but a practical reality experienced by some, to discover retrospectively that large chunks of social mythology or ideology which as a child they were taught and trustingly accepted are false.

In this review I have focused on the arguments advanced by Coady in the main task to which he addresses himself in *Testimony*: arguing the case against the Reductive Position, and in favour of a non-reductive conception of testimonial knowledge. We have seen that this task, when reduction is glossed as global reduction, is convincingly completed by Coady. I have introduced some distinctions which I believe enable the subject to be taken further. While this exposure of its structural skeleton has shown the substantialness of Coady’s pioneering achievement in *Testimony*, it has inevitably not shown the richness of this important book. There is much of interest on every page, in Coady’s lucid and thoughtful discussions of the many matters, large and small, which are explored in his roundabout passage to his main conclusions. This man-made landmark in the underexplored territory of testimony will be

